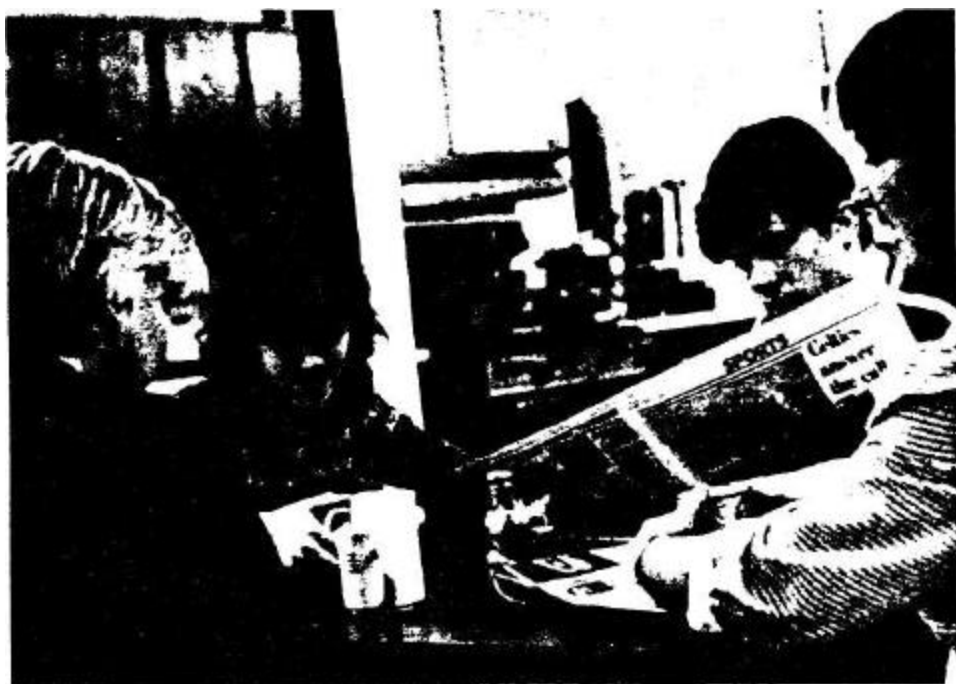


Owning Our Own Home: A New Model for Independent Living

by David and Margot Wizansky



"We mostly do things on our own; we don't really need too much supervision."

Over the course of more than 20 years of working with developmentally disabled adults, it became clear to us that most—in spite of appearances or degree of independence, whether living in the parental home or on their own—were living lonely, isolated lives. Another observation was that those living independently or even in an agency or state supervised setting were often subject to the whims of landlords or agency or public policy, creating great insecurity for them and for their families.

Most of these adults, regardless of housing arrangements, are never fully integrated into the social life of the non-disabled community, nor are they considered fully participating citizens. We wondered whether property ownership in a community of their peers would improve any of these conditions.

In the last three years, we have facilitated the development of twenty-two units of condominium

housing for adults with developmental disabilities in Brookline, Massachusetts. This was a joint venture of parents and residents with considerable help from an architect/developer and an attorney.

The units are located in two large Victorian-style houses. Each house is within walking distance of more than a dozen stores as well as public transportation. An even wider range of shopping and recreational facilities can be reached within 20 minutes on public transportation. This includes downtown Boston.

These "chaperoned" condominium boarding houses combine the opportunity for residents (and parents) to own their own homes while enjoying the friendship and support of other unit owners and around-the-clock trained staff.

Current Structure

This concept of housing for adults with special needs is new and evolving. All of us (residents, parents, house staff, and supervisory staff) are learning together. We will describe the structure which is working in our community in order to provide guidelines for other groups.

Each resident owns a unit which includes a private bedroom and a share of the common space. Residents share dining, living, recreation, and guest rooms, as well as a large kitchen where the task of

cooking dinner with staff assistance rotates among the residents.

All residents are over 18, capable of self-care, free of serious emotional disorders, and able to negotiate the community on their own. They are occupied during the day at school, in sheltered workshops, or working in the competitive job market.

When residents are at home, an experienced house manager is available for individuals who need some assistance or encouragement. The house manager and other house staff provide supervision in the areas of planning, scheduling, shopping, meal preparation, budgeting, using leisure time, personal grooming, and care of the house. A staff person who lives in an apartment on the first floor is on call at night and oversees the early morning routine. Staff is there to facilitate independent living, not to provide services to dependent adults.

Residents enjoy the freedom of going out on their own, or in small groups of two or three, with friends from within the house or friends from the community. Activities are of their own choosing. Though they share a house, each resident has a private room and is expected to respect the privacy and individual differences of his or her housemates.

Almost all the adult residents describe themselves as mentally retarded. Each requires some assistance from time to time, but not the intensive services usually provided in other residential settings. They



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are not ready or able to live completely on their own. A few were in residential programs before moving to the condominiums. Most were living at home where they yearned for opportunities for peer socialization and wanted increased independence from their parents.

At the same time, their parents were looking into the future, recognizing the need to insure ongoing, reliable support for their disabled sons and daughters. They knew that at some point they would no longer be able to provide direct care.

For some of the residents, their condominiums will be a stepping stone to more independent living situations in the future. For others it is a permanent home.

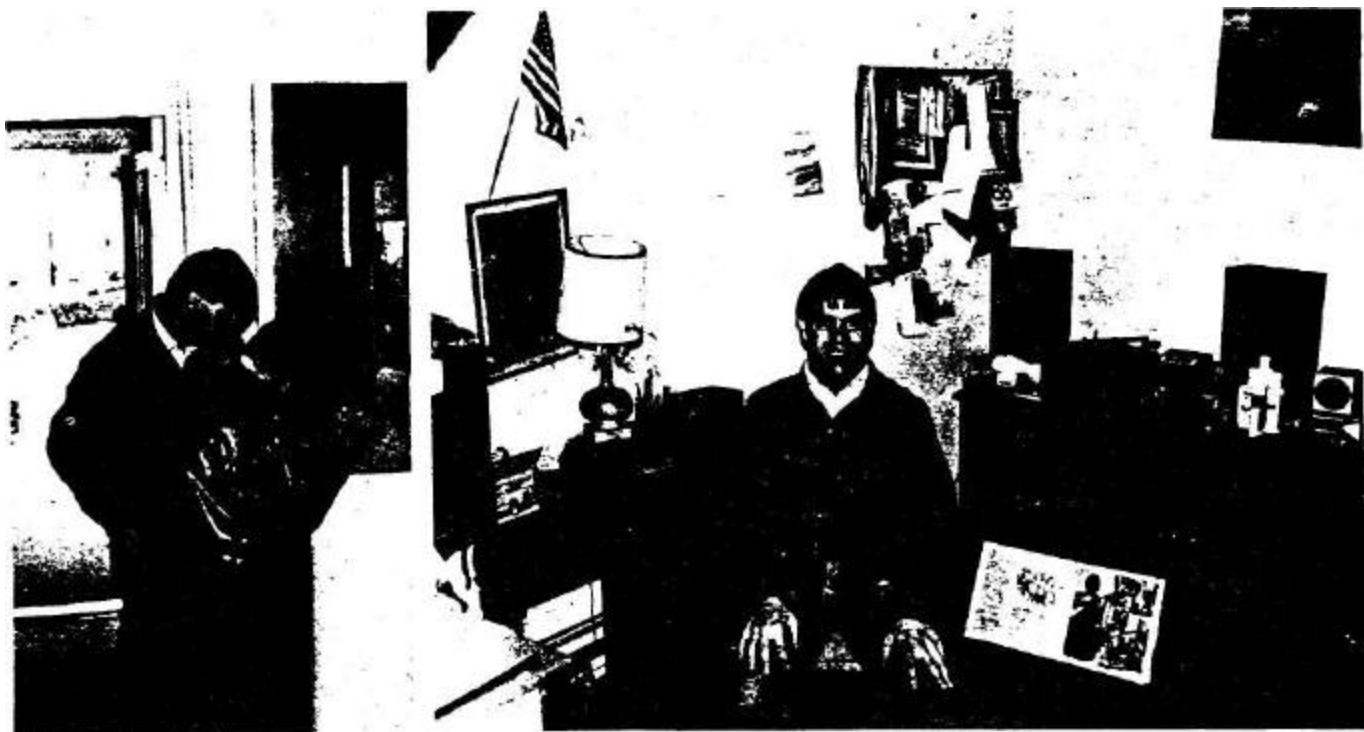
Private Development

The development of these condominiums has been done with private funds; no public funds have been utilized. Residents and/or their parents purchase the units and make their own financial arrangements to do so. Some families have purchased units outright. Others have financed purchases with a bank mortgage. Owners pay real estate taxes to the town. Financially and legally, this development is like any other condominium unit in the community.

Each resident pays a monthly fee which covers all meals (except weekday lunches), staff, administration, insurance, utilities, real estate taxes, building maintenance, and other costs. Exclusive of financing costs, these monthly operational fees range between \$500 and \$600 depending on the number of units in the building. Owners also make monthly payments for real estate taxes and for principal and interest if they have a mortgage.

Some residents are able to pay their own way with income from employment or government





support programs. (Owning property which serves as a primary residence does not affect eligibility for various government support programs.) Other residents need regular financial assistance from families.

Owners of these units can benefit from the income tax deductions available for interest payments and taxes. Far more important, as with any real estate purchase, owners are building equity in their own property so they can sell if they decide to move.

A nonprofit corporation oversees the building and manages the staff. A condominium trust owns the building. Many parents continue to be involved in these management groups, continuing their vital role as founders of the project.

In these two developments, we emphasize that housing is the primary service residents are purchasing, and that they are receiving help in managing it themselves. Each building has a lodging house permit. This means that the town can inspect the building in reference to safety and health regulations.

More Than Just a Place to Live

Expectations for residents and staff are different from many traditional group homes. Residents are expected to participate in cooking and cleaning teams for the evening meal and be at home for dinner seven evenings a week unless they notify their house manager that they have other plans. Residents also participate in regular meetings with staff for help dealing with the social interaction issues that come up when a group of people live together. They are required to attend a weekly

condominium meeting with the house manager present. An optional weekly process meeting is facilitated by a licensed clinical social worker.

Staff members are expected to serve as resources in case of difficulty, but they do not plan programs or activities. Instead they encourage self-determination; they do not make decisions for residents. For those residents who have lived in group homes and similar programs as well as some of those who have lived at home, this is a new life experience.

Adults with developmental disabilities rarely have the opportunity to own property or to have a voice in the hiring of staff that assists them. (Residents actually approve the hiring of staff.) Thus far, these projects have demonstrated that pride, property ownership, and a say in services can contribute a great deal to personal growth. Everyone in the condominiums has changed and grown. They have supported each other through good times and hard times. They are cooking, shopping, taking public transportation, budgeting, banking, and using their community for fun and recreation, just like their non-disabled neighbors. †

Readers interested in further information about the condominium project can write to David and/or Margot Wizansky, 12 Lincoln Rd., Brookline, MA 02146.

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